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ABSTRACT

The diverse student body at Illinois Central College has an average age of 30. For such students, life-long learning equips them to move beyond provincial aspects of their own communities and to place value on other heritages as well. To reach the diversity of the students found in the community college composition classroom, teachers need to create a nonthreatening environment and then skillfully manage the room, the inhabitant, and the activities. Teachers can do this by: offering get-acquainted exercises so that teacher and students can quickly come to know one another; encouraging students to take active responsibility for self; avoiding focusing all of the attention during a class session on the teacher; being flexible in course plans; encouraging collaboration; administering simple learning style profiles; promoting feedback; determining office hours by consulting student schedules as well as teacher schedules; offering individual conferences with students; using computers; reassessing the role of handouts; promoting comfortable silences in the classroom; rhythmically using class time and teacher aids in a variety of ways; stressing communication for real-life audiences; and helping students to synthesize what they have learned. (RS)

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LIFE-LONG LEARNING: A REALITY FOR ALL?

SUSAN BECKER

ILLINOIS CENTRAL COLLEGE

COMMUNITY COLLEGES

where learning never ends

New logo promotes lifelong learning at community colleges

The Illinois community college system has kicked off a five-year marketing campaign using the slogan "Illinois Community Colleges: Where Learning Never Ends." The campaign is intended to increase public awareness of the state's 40-district community college system.

The campaign and slogan were designed by the Illinois Community College Trustees Association public relations committee and a coalition of marketing directors and public information officers at community colleges.

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SUSAN BECKER

LIFE-LONG LEARNING: A REALITY FOR ALL?

At Illinois Central College, we have a diverse student body:

Total students: 13,632

Full-time: 4,197 Part-time: 9,435

5,623 Male 8,009 Female

Age range: 13-83 Average age: 30

Racial balance: C: 91% AA: 5% A: 1% Hisp. 1%

The Illinois State Board of Education on behalf of the people of Illinois has committed itself to a world-class education for all its citizens. The goal:

> All people of Illinois will be literate lifelong learners who are knowledgeable about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and able to contribute to the social and economic well-being of our diverse, global society.

What do we mean by life-long learning?

Life-long learning equips students to move beyond provincial aspects of their own communities and to place value on other heritages as well. Educators emphasizing multicultural awareness and a global perspective in their studies encourage world-class citizens. Above all, when classroom leaders themselves maintain a global perspective, the classroom will not make or contain learning boundaries; instead, it will empower students to take charge of their own learning.

Through their use of the teacher, the course materials, and their classmates, students can become their own teachers responsible for meshing the course of study with their whole lives, embodying what is now termed whole language learning for whole-living.

If life-long learning is offered to all, what is the teacher's role in carrying out that guarantee? (And there is a movement afoot to have community colleges provide written guarantees for all students!)

Teachers must first accept the responsibility and then use all their resources to carry out the guarantee. In order to reach the diversity of the students found in the college composition classroom, teachers need to create a nonthreatening environment and then skillfully manage the room, the inhabitants, and the activities.

1. BECOMING ACQUAINTED. It is important for people in a room to address each other by name and respond to each other with interest. How do we quickly come to know each student and help them know each other? Which get acquainted exercises work may depend on the type and size of class: treasure hunts, interviewing, introducing, speaking about a favorite pastime, college major, career plan, family situation, etc. For sharing information, a circular room arrangement gives everyone visible equality and promotes attentive listening. Repeatedly, students have remarked that they have less tendency to skip classes that have a personal

atmosphere where students know each other. Why not share copies of the class roster to reinforce in print the oral learning of names? Knowing others fosters friendships and collaboration; knowing others creates a warm and welcome classroom atmosphere.

2. STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY. From little on, our students have been trained in school that by sitting still, not interrupting, following teacher orders, and being quiet, they will be the best students. If they fail to achieve, then someone or something else must be at fault. But the hand that points a finger at another has three fingers pointing back to itself. In today's world students must bear responsibility for their own learning. That starts with attendance, punctuality, supplies, listening, and questioning. Design each classroom session for those students in attendance and in harmony with the proceedings. Should a student feel "out of it" for any number of reasons (legitimate or not), he is not part of the action; after all, each session happens only once. How does a student not in synchronization with the class, get back in sync? Not from the teacher using the classtime of others to accommodate the one who has deviated. Students get back in sync only by taking responsibility for themselves. To guard against being out of sync and endangering their learning even more, students can have a class buddy; they can know the teacher's office telephone number and office location. Would they not show up for a job without first calling the boss, offering an explanation, asking for reassignment? Only active responsibility for self leads to lifelong learning.

3. CLASSROOM FOCUS. Avoid focusing all of the attention during a class session on the teacher. Lecturing is only one way to promote learning, and it is a way fast losing its staying power! Try not to spend all of the time behind a desk or podium located at the front of a classroom arranged in traditional rows. Walk around a traditionally arranged room; take a "back seat" when students are speaking. Better yet, rearrange the room with desks in small groups or in a circle so that the focus is on the students. Instead of towering above them in a position of dominance, promote equality by sitting among the students. Meeting students on their level is another way of empowering them.

4. FLEXIBILITY. Be flexible in course plans. Yes, for authenticity and confidence, provide a syllabus, grading scale, and exam schedule, but make only a skeletal plan. The individuality of each group might call for changes in assignments, adjusted expectations, and variable deadlines. Find occasions to encourage and reward on a day-to-day basis. Try to allow for student choices and unexpected life happenings like illness or death, broken-down cars, job complications, or inclement weather. Tie in to happenings connected with weather, war, and politics. Flexibility is the key to meeting our fast-changing world.

5. COLLABORATION. Students learn from their teachers, from their texts, and from each other. Encourage collaboration. At the beginning, capitalize on the proximity of students to each other for geographic grouping of

students; later intermingle students by sex, age, race, learning style, personality, interest, and ability. Foster movement about the room as well as about the entire building/campus. Encourage impassioned discussion and new ideas that spring from group interaction. Listening to others encourages volunteer sharing of particular group discoveries or talents with the entire class. There is so much to be gained from working together!

6. LEARNING STYLES. Why not administer a simple learning-styles profile or even the Myers-Briggs Indicator? Teachers can easily complete the inventory along with students and share the results individually as well as with the class as a whole. Verbal, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners have different modes of learning and communicating. Teachers and students who know and understand themselves are better able to work with others in collaborative groups. Since communication style is dependent upon personality, reaching an audience in speaking or writing can only be accomplished through audience analysis. When we learn to gear messages to the receiver, we experience a success in communication that goes far beyond a classroom setting.

7. FEEDBACK. Students are constantly assessing. Teachers should, too. Promote feedback to help know the pulse of individuals in particular groups. Daily journal writing on what works (or doesn't work) encourages student self-expression. Another method is the memo form. When they

have something to say about the class proceedings/methods, students write a memo to their teacher on a prearranged memo form anytime during the semester. Their helpful (and confidential) remarks vary from "Attached is a copy of an article that I think ties in with the discussion we had last week on X." to "Just wanted to let you know that my parents kicked me out of the house so I don't have all of my stuff." By providing teacher feedback to each memo, teachers model give-and-take while keeping their finger on the pulse of the classroom.

8. OFFICE HOURS. Is it possible to have office hours that are determined by student schedules as well as teacher schedules? A daily posting as in business (rather than different hours on different days) is a courtesy to others. Unrelentingly, hold fast to the times designated to build trust and to encourage frequent contacts. Although beginning students are reluctant to approach a teacher alone, they will often come with a friend or respond to personal encouragement or a particular reason for stopping in, like picking up a handout or dropping off a journal. There is no substitute for frequent one-on-one contact to solidify teacher-student rapport.

9. CONFERENCING. To talk about their particular writings, students need individual attention from their teacher. Why not divide the class into conferencing days, circulate among groups in the classroom, and/or schedule private or dual conferences in the office? Prepare for such conferences by posing questions, providing a preplanning form, and/or listing the goals of the conference. Although there are different levels of conferences requiring different formats, conferences should be frequent, and they need not be long. When possible, sense student timing and try to be flexible enough to respond when students are most in need.

10. WORD PROCESSING. The most significant advancement in the teaching of writing has come from computerized word processing. Student feedback increasingly confirms this conclusion with the students originally most frightened of modern technology heaping the highest praise. Using computers provides variety from the verbal, encourages interaction among students, puts the body to work for tactile learners, takes away the frustration of nonspellers, eases the process of providing multiple drafts, and moves learning out of the regular classroom. Word processing cuts across all sexes, ages, and abilities. Word processing enhances a job-related skill, making writing more relevant to the workaday world. Word processing is an incontrovertible part of any composition class!

11. HANDOUTS. What is the role of handouts in a college classroom? To provide a written record of important information. There is an art to distributing handouts. Don't expect to have students' undivided attention while distributing handouts because when students have new paper in hand, they want to look at it. Why not talk to the students first about the information they will receive and then either distribute the handouts to be silently read then or else direct students to pick up handouts as they leave the classroom? Next, consider if the handout is even needed at all. Why is it that some students leave their handouts behind, throw them away, or remark, "You don't even have to go to so-and-so's class. Just get the handouts!" Do too many handouts prepared by the teacher encourage passive learning? Oral directions encourage listening skills, student interaction, and immediate feedback. Reassessing the role that handouts play might also address the paper overload!

12. SILENCE. We live in a time of word pollution and noise overdose. Language blares at us from every corner. We have moved far away from the silence revered by our Native Americans. Try to enhance concentration by promoting comfortable silences in the classroom. When asking questions, allow time for students to think before responding. Respect silence to foster that thinking. Don't feel obligated to fill that space with more explanation or an immediate answer. When giving directions for a class

activity, step out of the way to allow students to proceed with that activity without imposing continued talk, and questions that interfere with concentration. During writing and reading times the teacher can model noninterference of others' "private" time. Silence is golden. Listen.

13. VARIETY. Keep the room moving, as they say, by rhythmically using class time and teacher aids in a variety of ways. Set a natural pace to make everyone productive yet comfortable. Recognize short attention spans. Divide allotted time into blocks that shift from individual to teacher to group focus. Encourage students to move about the classroom; for long sessions, set up "working breaks." Connect sensory experiences with texts by utilizing all the aids available: chalkboards, overhead projectors, desks, tables, windows, audio and video recorders, the students themselves, other professors, administrators, and the teacher's ever-present own human touch! Sometimes, move the entire class -- to the library, to the computer room, to the gymnasium, to the lecture hall for a teleconference or campus speaker, or to the outside under a spreading chestnut tree!

14. FORUM. Although the classroom is the immediate environment and the classmates and teacher are the immediate forum, communication does not end there. Stress communication for real-life audiences, i.e., listeners and readers who are interested in the subject and need to be won over by

the communicator. Ask students to write notes and letters to real audiences--like friends and family. Foster "Writing Across the Curriculum" where students write reports, abstracts, reviews, research papers, applications forms and brochures for both academic and public forums. Encourage students to bring reading and writing assignments from other disciplines into the English classroom. Use a portfolio system to build pride and responsibility for a body of work that can travel with the students to their next environment in academia or in the job market. Student portfolios are a useful device for elevating student self-awareness and worth.

15. SYNTHESIZING. As the facilitator for the diverse individuals in a classroom, praise student efforts to speak up or take initiative. Encourage independence, yet follow the practice of providing overviews and closures for units of study. Show students how to integrate major points by establishing cognitive links between the familiar and the new. Help them engage in problem-solving, critical reading, critical thinking, and critical writing by promoting evaluation of the course content. Help students feel their progress by encouraging personal responsibility for their choices. Ask questions of them, and don't be afraid to answer their questions with "I don't know, but let's find out." Through the growth of their students, teachers are in a unique position to grow, too. Together we enlarge our minds, expand our social conscience, and become world-class citizens through the reality of lifelong learning.